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Through grace alone

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Through Grace Alone

Lynne Adair Moir

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

English

May 2010

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated with all my love to my daughter Amy, my son Kenneth, his wife Catherine, and my grandchildren Samantha and Luke.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people who patiently guided and encouraged me during this journey and I am deeply grateful to each and every one. First, to Professors Robert G. Lesman and Judith M. Riggin, Northern Virginia Community College who encouraged me to continue my education and apply to JMU; to Professor Susan Facknitz, without whose encouragement and friendship I never would have continued writing poetry; to my readers: Dr. Annette Federico, who generously ignored my math scores in the GRE and allowed me entry into the Graduate Program, Dr. Dabney Bankert who has modeled for me what it is to be “the scholar to whom the book is true,” Professor Inman Majors, whose fiction class reunited me with the adventure of storytelling. To Professor Brian Cockburn, Head of the Music Library, my boss and good friend, to Karen Snively, Music Library Services Manager, co-worker, friend, and poetic inspiration, thank you both for your valued and appreciated encouragement and for your flexibility in my hours away from work; to Laura Fly, whose friendship, faith and humor were always there to rely upon; to my dear friend Esther Stenson who picked me up many times and gently set me back on the journey up the sometimes thorn-strewn mountain path, thank you Esther for all of your loving and generous support; to my dear friend Michael whose daily telephone calls warmed my shriven heart, and to poet extraordinaire and my valued and beloved thesis advisor Professor Laurie Kutchins, whose kind and generous mentoring and crystalline in-seeing into a gagged and muffled student’s heart mid-wifed poems that otherwise might never have been born. Thank you all from the deepest regions of my heart.

Preface

In her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *American Primitive*, Mary Oliver's poem "Egrets" takes the poem's speaker on a difficult journey through "scumbled leaves, fallen branches...[and] knotted catbrier," to come upon a pond in which she discovers three egrets, who even "half-asleep...had / such faith in the world that made them" that "they opened their wings / softly and stepped / over every dark thing" (19-20). It was with that same blind, half-asleep faith that I began my inward and outward journey through mystery and grace, but perhaps that is the way this sort of journey always begins. Partly through examining the work of Oliver's scholars and partly through my research on Mary Oliver's poetry, I was led to the idea that grace and mystery are not exclusive to the human realm, but are imbued in all of creation, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. I know that I have been keenly aware of the movement of grace within my own life during these last several years, and that awareness is the reason for the title of my thesis, "Through Grace Alone." My thesis is comprised of poems and stories which depict that journey, travelling from a place of terror, loss, and grief to a region of wonder, discovery, and surprise.

Central to the theme of the prose and poetry that follows is the concept of place and space as defined by author and critic J. Scott Bryson in his book *The West Side of Any Mountain*. Bryson bases his theory upon cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* in which Tuan explains the concept of "place" as our sense of belonging or "home," and "space" as the freedom we seek once we have obtained the relative security of "place" (Bryson 9). The short fictional pieces and poetry

in my thesis fit Bryson's and Tuan's theoretical framework as they seek to establish what Tuan calls "topophilia," or a connection between the people and the places or settings they inhabit thus creating a sense of home.

In my experience, the creation of art in any form is a process of co-creation, in a Jungian sense a partnership with the collective unconscious and an engagement with the spiritual. For me, that engagement was a fortunate aspect of my participation in English classes which provided an impetus for change and a place of relative sanity during a time when my personal world was in chaos. My writing is heavily influenced by my reading, both theoretical and literary, and many of the poems and stories in my thesis were written in direct response to the literature read in these classes. Laurie Kutchins' poetry workshop introduced me to the poet Mary Oliver and I chose in that class to apprentice myself to Oliver's work. Many poems in this thesis are the result of that apprenticeship, including: "The Bodice Ripper," "A Face in the Oak," and "Defiance." The stories "Static" and "Lagniappe" were influenced by my reading of Flannery O'Connor in Jean Cash's Southern Literature class. In those fictional pieces I alluded to the South as a setting, and while there may not be an overt epiphany present in my stories, there is at least the choice of growth and change presented to one or more characters. The poem "Bear Country" by Leslie Marmon Silko, read over twenty years ago in another English class, inspired my poem "Shadows." My intention was to recreate the hypnotic, spell-binding voice of the speaker in Silko's poem. The speaker in my poem is reading poetry, and invites the poem's present reader to join in what may be an unsettling experience. Reading the poetry of John Berryman and Louise Glück in Laurie Kutchins' "Characters in Poems" class led to the writing of the poem "On the Streets and Avenues." Again, my intention

was to recreate the voice, at least in Glück's case, and also to imagine the chaotic mind of a homeless person on the street. We also read Claudia Emerson's epistolary and very personal book of poems *Late Wife* that semester, and Emerson's poetry gave me the permission I sorely needed to give expression to the personal. As many as twenty years ago, I read Denise Levertov's poem "A Woman Alone," and it is this poem that the character in "On the Edge" recalls. In many ways, reading Levertov's poem as an undergraduate set in motion the possibility of this journey. Reading poetry can be a dangerous pastime, and the condition of grace can be dangerous as well. For instance, the story/prose poem "Head in the Clouds" was written after I watched Benjamin Bagby's 2008 performance of *Beowulf*, the words coming into my head as though from a source other than my own consciousness; I merely wrote them down.

Nature too has always been a source of inspiration for my writing. My family spent summers on our Vermont farm where there was no electricity and no telephone; the only "modern convenience" was the automobile. We cooked upon a wood-burning cook stove, played cards or read the *Reader's Digest* by the light of kerosene lanterns, or listened to Aunt Honey strum her mandolin as she and Uncle John sang songs in German sitting on the porch in the cool night air, the sky alight with stars and the lawngrass filled with lifting fireflies. Interacting with nature there was simply a part of the everyday experience, walking the meadows and cathedral-forested mountains, being plunked on the broad back of a kind draft horse who babysat me while it grazed, watching the miracle of sunrise over the White Mountains of New Hampshire, being awakened in the dark and chilly early hours by my Dad who took me outside to see the aurora borealis play in the night sky, or just to watch the stars, Dad naming the constellations one by one. All these

wonderful experiences filled my mind and heart to overflowing, and I began to write. At ten I was a lover of horses and wrote horse stories, at twelve my first pre-teen crush was Ralph Waldo Emerson; later I found kinship with Silko and Oliver and more recently admiration for the scholars I have been reading, including Charlene Spretnak and her work with Green Politics and spirituality.

Laird Christensen, in his essay, "The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver," written for *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (edited by J. Scott Bryson) points to a line in Oliver's poem "The Ponds" which celebrates the "white fire of a great mystery," and relates that line to "the same [thought] that [physics] describes less ecstatically through the laws of thermodynamics" (136). Both Christensen's essay and Bryson's criticism posit the theory that our concept of reality is limited by our phenomenological perceptions. I imagine then the possibility of the existence of simultaneous realities even at the same point in time. There are, of course, scientifically proven simultaneous worlds, for even in the macrocosm of our own physical bodies there is the cellular world, and the world of our atoms. These ideas led to the arrangement of the poems and stories which follow. The voice in the first poem, "The Bodice Ripper," is that of the speaker in the present moment as she considers the stories told her by her young female friend. If one can say there is a central character to this thesis, the story "Static" shows that character even before her journey began. The poem "Tea Leaves" predicts the main character's future and her present at the same moment, as the speaker herself experiences and predicts at once. The subsequent poems and stories move and flow through my thesis in the same way, weaving in and out of time to examine the past in light of the (then) present moment. There are both poems and short stories in my thesis simply because some of the events, although

fictionalized to a degree, could only be related through one or the other genre. For instance, the intense compaction of the singular moment in “The Bodice Ripper” is in stark contrast to what can only be an endless single moment in “good girl” Baby Cake’s static life, unless she effects an internal change.

In a 1991 article written for *Sierra* magazine, Oliver asserts, “Writing that does not influence the reader is art that sleeps, and misses the point.” It is my fervent hope that the works that follow may resonate with another reader who, for whatever reason, finds that the assumptions held for a lifetime are mere illusions and that they must step out into the mystery, come what may.

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The Bodice Ripper

For Karen

“Love is like an opera,” someone I admire
once wrote in a poem. I listen
to your music to your librettos from
Mississippi pulsing with humid, febrile heat, replete
with dreadlocks, piercing, tattoos, and to further the imagination
descriptions of a deep and softly spoken, silky-whiskey-throated, dark-eyed
southern drawl—Oh!

I am thinking
Maybe
I might place your
music
in a poem.

And yet... what do I know—
what do I know
of the flowering of another's heart, or
of another soul's yearnings, their
body's lusts and passions?

Fearing to get it wrong, to misconstrue,
I merely listen (with rapt attention) believing—
a second-hand opera is better than
no opera at all.

Static

“Looks like the honeymoon’s over,” Berenice said with a smirk. “Look at her. Just look at her.”

Berenice drew her breath in sharply, letting it out again in an alarming and disapproving huff. She planted her feet firmly on the kitchen floor, set her thick legs in a wide-apart stance, then, holding onto the kitchen countertop, she bent from the waist and craned her neck forward to peer out the kitchen window into the wooded backyard where her daughter-in-law was working, clearing brush. Wally, Berenice’s twenty-five year old son, stood beside his mother, his face grey with pain and his eyes wide with shock. It was late Saturday morning and Wally had just gotten out of bed, heeding the urgent and demanding call of his mother to witness the scene unfolding from the kitchen window.

Wally’s new wife, Baby Cakes, twenty-one, had ceased working and, rake held idle in her hands, was speaking with their forty-something next-door neighbor, Bill, a married man and the father of two young boys and a pre-teen-aged girl. There was a large pile of dead leaves, twigs, and brambles on the ground beside Baby, but that didn’t fool Berenice one bit. It was obvious that girl was making some time out there in the backyard. And here she was, married to Berenice’s much-too-good-for-her son Wally for nearly one year. Baby Cakes looked up from her conversation with Bill, and seeing both Berenice and Wally gazing at her out the window, smiled and waved.

Berenice stepped back a bit from the window then and lit a long brown More menthol cigarette. She inhaled deeply and deliberately, allowed her knowing smirk to

remain visible to her son as she regarded him meaningfully with hooded eyes. She didn't want to say I told you so, but then again, she did. Why was it that Wally never listened when she obviously knew best? Blood was, after all, thicker than water. But it was satisfying to see that Wally was visibly shaken and distraught at the sight of his young wife talking with another man.

Good, she thought. That'll teach him.

"Have a drink," Berenice told him. "It'll help calm your nerves. Plenty more fish in the sea Wally. I told you, you should have married Francine, Madge's daughter."

Wally nodded, his dull expression of painful anxiety and shock morphing into one of dangerous, silent anger. It was 11:30 in the morning, late enough by Wally's reckoning, so with obedient haste he mixed a bourbon and soda, splashing some of the liquor on the vinyl kitchen countertop, staining it brown.

"Let her clean it up," his mother counseled, and Wally nodded, managing a thin smile. He raised the glass to his lips, took a large swig and swallowed, feeling the familiar sting of booze in his mouth and throat, its warming fingers spreading through his gut, relaxing him. Nice. No one could reach him to hurt him now.

"Thanks Ma," he said, regarding his mother with warm affection and gratitude. Berenice nodded, patting his hand as a long tip of ash from her cigarette fell unnoticed to the kitchen floor.

"Here she comes," Berenice said to Wally in a confidential tone as she exhaled cigarette smoke through her mouth and nose. Always stay one step ahead, keep 'em off

balance, Berenice thought; it's a dog eat dog world. Her thoughts made her small eyes spark like flint striking steel.

The sliding glass door in the dining room opened and Baby Cakes's light footsteps crossed the wood floor as she made her way quickly into the kitchen, smiling brightly, her face flushed pink. Berenice nudged Wally sharply in the ribs with her elbow and gave him a hard sidelong look wrought with judgment.

"Hi Wally! You're up! Did you have a good sleep? Would you like me to make you some breakfast? I did a bit of clearing in the back yard Wally, see?" she said pointing out the window. Young Baby Cakes was quite the happy-go-lucky Pollyanna, yet another aspect of her personality that set Berenice's teeth on edge.

Why you'd think butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, thought Berenice, smirking from behind the veil of grey smoke from the cigarette she held between two stubby fingers.

Smiling a beaming smile, Baby Cakes moved closer to Wally, giving him an affectionate hug and a kiss on the cheek. Wally's eyes bulged wide and his expression became one of total confusion. He drained his drink and set it down hard on the countertop, the ice cubes clinking loudly against the glass.

"What would you like for breakfast Wally?" Baby Cakes asked again softly.

"Pancakes and chicken gravy," Wally answered, mixing another bourbon and soda. "Make some of that country sausage too and give me a glass of V-8 with a slice of lemon on the side of the glass. Maybe start off with some pickled herring and cream on

lettuce. That and toast and coffee'll be good. Unless you want to bake me some nice biscuits."

Without an answer, Baby Cakes began preparing breakfast, frying sausage, mixing pancake batter, brewing coffee. Wally watched her carefully, not saying anything at all. Then, with a faint smile and a half-disguised sneer, Wally said, "I saw you out there with Bill. What were you two talking about?"

Baby Cakes looked up at Wally with an expression of surprise. "Oh! Nothing really. He was saying how he needs to clear out the brush in their yard too, that's all. I've really done a lot of work this morning Wally."

"I know you have Baby," said Wally, relaxing completely now. "You're a good girl." Wally patted the top of her head. Baby Cakes smiled up at him, her blue eyes shinning with warmth and love. Wally managed a slight smile in response while he slowly and deliberately stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

Berenice glanced a knowing look at Wally, shook her head and, making no attempt to hide her bemused and disgusted smirk, shuffled heavy-footed from the kitchen into the living room. She turned on the television and found a game show she liked, so she turned the volume up loud enough to drown out the nauseatingly saccharine conversation now going on in the kitchen. The screaming din of applause from the TV show rocked the living room. She sat down and made herself comfortable in her dark green Naugahyde chair with its sagging seat bottom that nearly touched the floor, and crushed her cigarette out in the green glass ashtray on the table beside the chair.

Not like me to interfere with their marriage, Berenice thought smugly, stretching her legs straight out and knocking her slippered feet together several times. They can't blame me for that.

Baby Cakes appeared in the doorway.

Here she is again, thought Berenice. Can't give me any privacy. Why doesn't she go somewhere and get out.

"Would you like some breakfast Mrs. Van der Donck?" Baby Cakes asked.

"Of course," Berenice answered icily. "I'll have the same as Wally: herring and cream on lettuce, pancakes, gravy, sausage, toast, and coffee. Orange juice instead of V-8. How soon will it be ready? You know my doctor says I need regular meals." It was always best, Berenice thought, to end on a note of regal authority in order to keep the help in line.

"It won't take me long," Baby Cakes answered. "Just a few minutes."

"Well, you do realize it is past breakfast. Nearly time for lunch." Berenice gave Baby Cakes a hard accusing look.

You were both still asleep this morning, Baby Cakes thought but she didn't speak the words out loud. Weak with the heaviness of guilt, Baby Cakes slunk back into the kitchen to prepare breakfast, leaving Berenice feeling a delicious swell of triumph.

Sucker's born every minute, she thought.

She reached into the pocket of her flowered cotton housedress and withdrew the long green pack of cigarettes, slowly pulling one dark-papered smoke from the pack. Berenice found her lighter, slipped the filtered end of her cigarette between her bee-stung lips, flicked the lighter open and lit the end of her cigarette, inhaling deeply. She released the smoke from her lungs slowly savoring the rush of nicotine, the grey smoke curling thickly around her face and through her coarse short dark hair. She smiled to herself, musing on the thought that this young girl would not be terribly difficult to remove from her life, leaving her with Wally once again, the episode with the girl a minor interruption, nothing more.

Thin-skinned and over-sensitive, she considered. Easy.

She watched smirking as the table was laid for breakfast and, while Wally remained in the kitchen waiting for his breakfast to be served, Baby Cakes carried in steaming platters of pancakes and sausage, a gravy boat of hot, thick chicken gravy, a glass of V-8 with a lemon slice on the side, small plates of herring and cream arranged on a bed of lettuce, plates piled with buttered toast slices, and steaming cups of fragrant coffee.

Maybe she'll trip, Berenice mused, sniggering behind her hand at the thought.

"Breakfast's ready," Baby Cakes announced softly.

Berenice heaved herself up from the Naugahyde chair and walked quickly to her seat at the dining room table. She left the television blaring in the living room. *The Price is Right* as background noise. She sipped her coffee while her eyes scanned the table,

surveying the food hungrily. Wally took his place at the head of the table, and Baby Cakes sat beside him across from Berenice. Wally began eating his herring and cream taking large mouthfuls and chewing loudly. Berenice made sure her table manners were impeccable, taking miniscule bites and using her napkin frequently. She drained her coffee cup.

“Can you get me more coffee please dear?” she asked, addressing Baby Cakes who was so taken off-guard by the term of slight endearment that she nearly fell off her chair and sped to the kitchen and the coffee pot. Berenice took the opportunity of her absence to stuff her mouth as full as possible and as frequently as possible in order to satisfy her ravenous hunger.

“What sort of explanation did she give you for the goings on in the backyard this morning?” she whispered to Wally, her mouth full of food.

“She said it was nothing. She said they were just talking Ma.”

“Immhmm. Sure they were. Little Miss Innocent.”

Baby Cakes returned with Berenice’s coffee and passed her cup to her.

“Thank you dear,” Berenice said.

“Sure. You’re welcome.”

“Can you get me some too Baby?” Wally asked in a sing-song infantile voice.

Baby Cakes hadn’t eaten but one bite of food, yet she darted off to the kitchen with Wally’s cup.

“Well Ma,” he whispered. “Maybe it really was nothing. Let’s just forget it.”

“Oh I’m sure I’m not going to forget it at all, and I think you need to remember it too Wally. What we saw was not a good sign...not a good sign at all. You know I only want the best for you Wally. And she isn’t it.”

“Ma...,” whined Wally in a whisper.

“You’re my son Wally. My only son. It is only natural for a parent to want the best for their child.”

“But Ma....”

Baby Cakes returned with the coffee and they both ceased their conversation abruptly. Baby Cakes sat down at the table nervously, glancing first at Wally, then at Berenice. They both ignored her and went on eating, now piling pancakes and sausages on their dinner plates and pouring large amounts of chicken gravy over the stacks. Wally took five patties of country sausage and poured big dollops of ketchup over them. He began to dig in. Baby Cakes sipped her coffee, quietly thoughtful.

“Something wrong?” asked Berenice, her fork poised in the air. “You’re not eating.”

“I’m fine. Just not hungry.”

“Harrumph,” Berenice uttered contemptuously, “well you’d better eat something. We don’t want to have to pay any doctor’s bills for you if you get sick.” She looked at Wally and made a wry face.

Baby Cakes didn't move. She held the coffee cup in the palms of her hands, warming them. She sipped the coffee, staring at the table, not looking at either Wally or his mother.

"You want to clear some of these plates away so we can have our coffee without all this mess about?" Berenice directed lighting a cigarette. "And while you're up, get me an ashtray. Please dear." Expressionless, Baby Cakes complied, taking Berenice's and Wally's plates and her own clean one to the kitchen.

"She's not right in the head Wally. Some sort of chemical imbalance."

Wally considered his mother's statement quietly for a moment then said, "You might be right Ma."

"I know I'm right. There's definitely something wrong with her."

Baby Cakes returned with the coffee pot and freshly brewed coffee, an ashtray in her other hand. As she made her way from the kitchen to the dining room, she paused for just the briefest moment, then she suddenly seemed to wither and fade, swaying slightly, then crumpling to the floor, falling slowly as the petals of a blown flower fall softly to the earth. The coffee pot crashed to the floor alongside her, spilling hot coffee and grounds onto the wood floor; the ashtray skittered off into the living room. Baby Cakes lay motionless and unconscious.

"Good God! What's wrong with her now?" cried Berenice.

Wally jumped up from his chair, stepped quickly to his wife and sat beside her crumpled and unconscious form on the floor. He lifted one of her limp arms and felt for a pulse as he stared blankly at his watch. Berenice went to the bathroom and dampened a face cloth with cold water and brought it to Wally.

“Here. See if this rouses her. If it doesn’t I may have smelling salts in my room.”

Wally took the dampened cloth and grazed it over Baby Cakes’s forehead and cheeks. Her eyes fluttered, then opened.

“What the hell happened? Are you ok?” Wally shouted.

“Yes, I think so,” she answered meekly.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’m ok. I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry Wally.”

“We told you to eat something. What the hell’s matter with you scaring us like that? You sure you ok now?” Wally yelled.

“I think so, yes.”

“Good. We don’t want anything to happen to you Baby,” Wally said.

Berenice snorted.

“Thank you,” Baby Cakes whispered.

Wally brushed stray locks of hair from Baby Cake’s face, squeezed her arms and patted her cheeks roughly. “Can you stand up?” he asked.

“I think so, yes.”

“Good. Because the coffee pot spilled all over and made a mess. You need to clean it up.”

Berenice left the room, laughing softly to herself. She returned to her Naugahyde chair in the living room, lit another cigarette, crossed her legs at the knees, and began to watch *The Guiding Light*.

Tea Leaves

This is the way it will be:

Your friends will visit, share their time, share
their sweet, beloved selves—golden
beams streaming from their eyes
will warm you for awhile, close embraces soft
against your chest will let you feel
their body's substance solid, real and you will smile,
your heart full. Then
they will go home and there you'll be.

It will appear as though
the space around you is replete with gaping holes—
a glacial place their presence occupied—
and in those lonely hours
you will need
to look into your soul
and write poems.

Life on the Streets and Avenues

sometimes I see ghosts they don't hide
in shadows but are here beside
me even all around they speak their
glomming tongue their language of hilarity
and horror
their shades
in murky bleakness gleam the grey-black
mist elongated even
Faustus
visited me
I think
he wanted to amputate
(o my soul) my legs especially at the knees
hurt and yet I rejoice
I understand them even the gentle ones
flying from pain their tears smear every
blocked page without expression
with held invisible
voice the thoughts
won't come loss
all lost
joy

House on a Hillside

Today, I'd like to work outside. The October light

illuminates the trees, the air

is brisk and clear and I

have over one hundred fifty daffodils to plant.

Thinking they will naturalize well on the hill

out front, I gather up the bulbs, take up a shovel,

open the garage door. At once,

the sound of traffic streaming endless by

assaults my ears. I grit my teeth, clench

the bucket handle; I have a job to do.

I cross the lawn to the hillside near

the street and to the flower bed in front of cypress trees

planted to muffle the noise of traffic. I dig a hole, or try to,

the shovel hits rock not two inches down.

I try again; the ground is like concrete, even

the mulch layer resistant, hard. I need a pickaxe.

Cars pass by whoosing

their hideous cacophony. My head reels. I slip

on wet grass, wonder—will I tumble off this hillside

into the road? Will the hurrying cars even stop? I plant

a bulb; a “mother” bulb with two symbiotic

“babies” at her side.

Cars whoosh by screaming

their hideous cacophony. My head reels. Another

hole with the shovel, pull out

the dandelion root and all, replace it with a daffodil,
pat down the soil, try to think

loving thoughts to help the bulbs grow.

Cars scream their hideous, whooshing cacophony. My head

reels and I take up my shovel, the bucket of bulbs
and go back inside. Early Sunday morning is best.

Peaceful, quiet, before the traffic awakens.

And then, once inside, I think:

What of those poor bulbs I planted and left
alone out there

in the roiling dissonance?

.

...a house of cedar needs upkeep..."

He drives three hours on two interstates
just to stroll through Lowes with me
looking for stain and supplies
for the cedar-sided house he told me not to buy.

Walking beside him, my heart blossoms and
I smile at passersby, this day all unusually lovely
to my eyes. I want to stop each one and say,
"Here is my son; this tall, polite,
and honorable man. Here
is my beloved son, my
Ken."

Later this warm October afternoon, we two
are on the deck behind the house,
paint brushes at the ready, Ken up high
on the ladder, me nearby below, our conversation
comfortable, relaxed,
as he and I together watch
the cedar silver smooth beneath our hands.

When Ken Goes Home

From downstairs in the kitchen I can hear him
in the upstairs bedroom packing, speaking
on his cell phone to either family or job—
his life apart from me as though
he has already left, is already gone.

And I think of the afternoon I climbed
the steps ascending
from the music library, felt
the gush of outside air revive my spirit
brilliant sunlight spill into my eyes
the tulip poplar's leaves golden in autumn and
one singular branch a naked claw beseeching the sky

Defiance

It begins with the trees in autumn.

As the days grow shorter, as the Earth's axis
tilts from the sun, the trees in their season
flame their leaves
bursting with brilliance.

She loves the trees, loves
standing in their presence
listening.

And the trees, in their compassion, know.

She sees it begin. One strand,
then three, later several more:
pink and pale blue,
lilac and yellow, deep russet-red,
darker brown, even black and green
all interwoven in her hair. People stare, shake
their heads,
whisper

She thinkst at first to withdraw, flee their critical effulgence
and run to the trees

but instead

she smiles and tosses her head

letting all the colors fly while she remains

rooted.

On the Edge

There, at the pathway's edge, a woman
walks alone
inward-seeing, reflecting.
She is thinking of a poem she read,
long ago now it seems,
in a classroom as an undergrad
staring at the page something
in the words resonating
but not
completely understood. It was a poem about a woman
alone and content. But for her,
although half her bed is covered with books,
"O blessed Solitude" doesn't often
come to mind.

And she wonders why; feels guilty.
She wants the fear to end.
Weak. I'm weak, she thinks often. Yet
there is comfort
when her garden calls, or her dogs
push their faces into hers, their noses startling cold
their dark eyes kind, their long hound tails
sweetly wagging windmills of delight

Mystery

What does it mean the quiet hush
the dog curled snoring in their beds
the night stars humming through the door
(One page to read or maybe more)?

The poems she reads before she sleeps
tumble their words within her mind;
what does it mean her longing prayer
to let her spirit soar the air

while tears descend upon the page
her rainfall feelings wild?

What does it mean the reader there
Sitting, nodding in her chair

Lagniappe

Victoria Worthmore and her daughter Wisteria sat in the attorney's waiting room on comfortable, dark brown Moroccan leather chairs. They arrived forty-five minutes early to their appointment for the reading of Victoria's father's will, and had already perused the various reading materials set out upon the glass-topped coffee table for bored and impatient clients. Wisteria heaved a great sigh of impatience and squirmed uneasily in her chair as Victoria glanced at her and smiled.

"It will be over soon, dear," said Victoria. "I'm sure Herbert will see us in a little while."

"Yes," Wisteria replied looking quite glum. "But we've been waiting a long while now. What *is* he doing in there?"

The receptionist looked up from filing her nails and stared at the two women over the tops of her glasses. Her cold grey eyes were blank, reflecting neither expression nor thought, only a deep and burgeoning boredom. "Mr. Panerabred will see you shortly," she said flatly. Victoria nodded. "Thank you," she murmured as she crossed her slender, neatly stockinged legs at the knees, studied her own manicured fingernails reflexively, then tucked a loose end of platinum hair back into her French twist, her hand brushing past her diamond and sapphire earrings as she did so.

Wisteria gave her mother a look of pure impatience, arose from her chair and went to the window facing the street. She parted the slats on the venetian blinds and glanced outside. Victoria's brand new Dusk Mauve 1960 Chrysler Imperial Crown

Southampton, automotive symbol of her family's wealth and social standing, dominated the view of the parking area at the law offices of Herbert George Panerabred III, Esquire. Ancient oaks cast their deep, cool shade across the portico leading to the offices' entrance. The avenue beyond held the quiet passing of occasional traffic: boys on bicycles, ladies strolling leisurely past shop windows, gentlemen walking with purpose to keep important business appointments. A small peripheral movement to the right drew Wisteria's attention to a man dressed in a dark suit, a white dress shirt and vivid blood-red tie, his grey fedora's brim pulled low over his eyes. He stood near the window, smoking a cigarillo. Sensing her gaze, he looked up and met Wisteria's eyes directly, and as he did so he smiled an oily, arrogant smile which revealed a bright gold eyetooth. Wisteria recoiled, blushing, and her eyes flashed, first with a vague and tremulous fear, then with anger.

"Of all the unmitigated gall! Why the nerve!" she said. She parted the blinds again to see if the man was still there. He was there and he was still looking boldly at her, still smiling his sinister smile. Wisteria let the blinds snap back into place, and though her expression was now one of mere annoyance, a smile played faintly at the corners of her mouth. She tossed her long golden hair back into place upon her shoulders and smoothed her lavender silk blouse into the waistband of her slim black wool skirt. She let her eyes drop to the floor, recollecting herself, then returned to her chair, and, with deliberate insouciance, picked up a magazine from the coffee table and began riffling through its pages.

The door to the law offices opened slowly, and the man Wisteria saw earlier from the window stood framed in the doorway, his dark form bathed in the mottled shade and sunlight of the early afternoon. He carried what looked like a small piece of luggage which dangled by the handle held in his right hand. Wisteria studied her magazine intently as the man approached and chose a chair beside hers. As he came nearer, Victoria's elbow nudged Wisteria with a movement so small it was imperceptible to anyone but the receiver, and Wisteria turned to meet her mother's icy gaze. Victoria was silent but her pursed lips and haughty expression communicated a universal look of disdain which Wisteria knew well, a look which said: the person approaching is beneath us socially; completely disregard him in every way. Wisteria nodded her acquiescence to her mother's judgment and resumed her intense study of the magazine. Having done her maternal duty, Victoria returned her attention to Mr. Panerabred's office door.

From beneath the lower edge of her magazine, Wisteria saw the stranger's well-polished black shoes as he paused momentarily to stand directly in front of her, and she involuntarily looked up at him as he sat down. He stared back at her with intense, dark, and flinty eyes, tipped his hat, winked and smiled, flashing his pointy gold tooth and jiggling the toothpick now resting on the left side of his lower lip.

"Miss," he said in a hiss, giving the toothpick a bite.

Wisteria frowned and looked back at her magazine, anger rising in her throat. How dare he? Who was this, this, *person* to be so inordinately familiar? Why, he looked like a gangster! What had she to do with persons of this caliber; why the very thought

was mind boggling! Wisteria leaned towards her mother, who was staring in frowning concentration at the door to Mr. Panerabred's inner offices.

“Mother!” Wisteria whispered. “Mother, please!”

Victoria turned her frowning gaze momentarily upon her daughter whose expression was one fraught with discreet anxiety.

“Yes dear?” she asked in a distracted manner, still deliberately ignoring the man sitting beside her daughter. Wisteria implored Victoria's intervention with her eyes, but was met with an icy, indifferent response. Victoria cleared her throat, let her glance fall to her lap, and then turned away.

The man slowly put his arm around the back of Wisteria's chair and stroked her shoulder.

“Relax,” he said, drawing out the word, his gold tooth glinting with his smile.

“Oh!” Wisteria cried softly.

“I saw you lookin' out at me. Hey, I know you must be interested to know who I am,” the man said. “You know, you look just like your Mama did when she was your age.”

“How could you possibly know anything at all about my Mother? And please, remove your hand; stop touching me,” Wisteria said, taking his hand and untwining his arm from the back of her chair.

“Sure, sure, no problem,” the man said in a subdued voice, looking hurt. “Don’t chew worry; I do know your Mama, and I only want to look out for da both a youse. Hey, Wisteria, sweetheart, you need to know....”

“Please stop,” cried Wisteria. “Can’t you just go away? There is nothing, do you hear, *nothing* that I need to know as far as you are concerned.”

The stranger was silent then and regarded her with his dark and somber eyes; eyes that seemed to bore deeply into her soul; eyes that seemed to carry a message of great significance. He was no longer smiling. Discomfited by the stranger’s words, by his touch, his eyes, and by the seriousness of his expression, Wisteria reached for her mother’s arm.

“Mother,” she said with urgency in her voice, and Victoria turned to face her daughter.

“Yes dear,” Victoria said. “I am becoming impatient too. I think we need to either see Herbert right now, or re-schedule.”

“Yes Mother I agree,” Wisteria answered, making no allusion whatsoever as to the true nature of her immediacy.

“Pardon me Miss,” Victoria said to the receptionist who was still busy filing her fingernails. The receptionist looked up and without comment buzzed Mr. Panerabred, who came from within his office looking a bit frazzled.

“Victoria, please forgive me. Come in, won’t you? Ah, Wisteria, how lovely to see you again. How lovely indeed to see you both, even under these unfortunate circumstances,” Herbert Panerabred said, clasping each woman’s hand in turn and leading them ceremoniously into his office. But before closing his office door, he gave a brief nod of recognition to the man still in the waiting area, and held up an index finger indicating one minute. He then asked both women to sit down, and he returned to the large leather chair behind his desk. He cleared his throat as he casually, yet with utmost seriousness, rearranged the papers before him.

“Well ladies,” he said. “Shall we begin?” He paused, looking from Victoria to Wisteria, then back to Victoria again. “Your father’s Last Will and Testament is actually quite simple Victoria.” He lowered his voice, “I realize how difficult this is for you and we will make this as brief as possible.”

“Thank you Herbert,” Victoria replied sniffing then dabbing lightly at her nose with a fine linen handkerchief that she delicately removed from her purse. Wisteria shot her mother a glance and as she did so she noticed the doorknob to Herbert Panerabred’s office turning. The door began to open, slowly and quietly, inch by fractious inch.

Wisteria held her breath and tried to retain her poise. She heard Herbert’s voice as a murmur in the background of her attention, reading her grandfather’s will, naming her mother as his only child, naming her as his only grandchild; the two of them, the only rightful heirs to his estate. With but one exception: Percival.

“Who is Percival?” Victoria asked aghast.

Herbert Panerabred adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses as he raised his gaze from the document before him. “His cat,” he said.

“His wha-aaat?” Victoria shrieked, her handkerchief fluttering to the Oriental carpet.

“Percival is your father’s cat,” Herbert said gently. “The cat was your father’s only companion during his last days. Had you visited more often, you might have known.”

Victoria laughed. “Well, that is all well and good of course, but I am sure he hasn’t left his cat any substantial amount of money. After all,” she continued, “blood is thicker than water, and I am Daddy’s only kin. Wisteria too of course. As long as we are the...*stewards*... of Daddy’s monies, I don’t care if he kept a chimpanzee as a companion in his last days.”

“Lovely sentiment I’m sure Victoria,” Herbert said dryly. He lowered his eyes and studied the pages before him, but before Herbert could continue, the door to his office opened and the man with the gold tooth stood in the doorway; holding in his arms a large white Persian cat with eyes the color of emeralds.

“Come in Vincent, please,” said Herbert, rising from his chair. “Thank you for bringing Percival. Sit down, please, and join us.”

“Thank you sir, thank you,” Vincent said in a muffled voice, and sat in a chair along the far wall. He placed Percival on his lap and began stroking the cat with long, languid strokes. Vincent’s distance lent him the opportunity for observation, which he

took full advantage of, regarding first Victoria, then Wisteria, then Herbert, as he slowly continued to pet the cat. Percival purred and regarded them all with half-closed eyes and a haughty expression.

Victoria's mouth was agape, but she quickly regained at least partial composure and deliberately disregarded Vincent and the cat. Wisteria stared at her mother, seeking an explanation. Victoria's face and neck were crimson, and she folded her hands in her lap to keep anyone from noticing their trembling. She was furious.

"Why is the cat here Herbert? What is Vincent doing here?" she asked.

"Now, now, dear, all in good time," Herbert replied.

"Mother?" asked Wisteria.

"Not now," Victoria said.

"Let us resume, shall we?" asked Herbert, and not waiting for an answer continued reading the will.

"I bequeath to my beloved daughter Victoria, and to my beloved granddaughter Wisteria, the residue of my estate only upon the demise of my faithful and beloved companion Percival. Until that time, Percival shall be the sole and undisputed heir to my complete estate, including the automobile I purchased for Victoria earlier this year. I bequeath to Victoria a new automobile, one which I am undoubtedly certain will initially suit her, and which my faithful chauffeur Vincent shall deliver to the offices of Mr. Herbert George Panerabred III, Esq. on the day my will is read. On that day, Vincent

shall bring Percival to Mr. Panerabred's offices where Percival shall reclaim the 1960 Chrysler Imperial Crown Southampton as his own. Vincent shall continue as Percival's caretaker and shall enjoy all the rights and privileges of that position including remaining in his apartment on my estate as long as Percival remains alive. Thus, it is in Vincent's best interest to tend to Percival as faithfully as he tended to me.

To my beloved daughter Victoria and to my beloved granddaughter Wisteria I give the sum of \$50,000.00, share and share alike. I name Victoria as trustee of that amount. It is my utmost wish and intention that this sum will insure that Victoria and Wisteria will of necessity be wise in its employ. You may believe that I have not paid attention to your monetary habits during the last several years. In that you are quite mistaken. I hope in the years ahead you will develop a keener sense of financial responsibility. You will both need to find suitable employment. I suggest an investment in a good secretarial school where you can each learn to type, take shorthand, and learn proper office etiquette. God Bless you both."

Herbert set the document down on his desk, removed his glasses and placed them on top of the papers. He folded his hands and looked at Victoria, whose complexion had drained of all color. Wisteria looked back and forth at Herbert and her mother, her expression one of utter confusion. Vincent sat in his chair by the wall grinning and stroking the cat. Victoria was the first to speak.

"Well," she said. "I suppose that's that."

“I will need to take possession of the keys to the Southampton, Victoria,” Herbert said.

“Yes,” Victoria said and rummaged in her purse then removed the keys and handed them to Herbert who in turn passed them to Vincent.

“You will be fine you know, both of you,” said Herbert earnestly. “Fifty thousand dollars is a great deal of money...”

“Yes, but the amount pales...” Victoria began.

“I know,” said Herbert.

“And we each need to find...jobs...” she murmured, saying the word “job” as though it were something utterly distasteful.

“Yes,” said Herbert sympathetically.

“Even me, Mother? Do I need to find a ...job too?” Wisteria asked.

“Yes, dear, I am afraid you do,” Victoria replied softly. “We both do.”

Victoria rose elegantly from her chair. “Thank you Herbert,” she said, offering her hand, which he took in both of his. She coldly ignored his beseeching gaze. “Good bye,” she said. Herbert walked Victoria and Wisteria to the door. Vincent followed behind them holding the keys to Victoria’s car, the cat in his arms, its long fluffy tail switching back and forth beneath his left elbow.

Victoria, Wisteria, Vincent and Percival exited the offices of Herbert George Panerabred III, Esquire and walked to the parking area beneath the great ancient oaks. Vincent walked past Victoria, and as he did so, he slapped her bottom.

“Good to see you Toots,” he said as Victoria gasped. He unlocked the door to the Southampton and looked back at Wisteria and smiled.

“You ask your Ma about me,” he said.

He opened the door to the grand car, placed Percival gently on the passenger’s seat and climbed into the driver’s seat. He shut the door and started the engine. It purred. As the car glided away, Vincent looked one last time at Victoria and Wisteria, winked and smiled, his gold tooth glinting. Percival climbed onto the back of the front seat and perched there, giving them both a haughty look of triumph. The car drove off down the avenue. In its place was a tiny black 1957 VW Beetle, the keys dangling from the door. Wisteria and her mother could think of absolutely nothing to say.

Saint Jerome

sitting in his study before the blank page,
needed to focus
so he prayed.

This was before he became a saint when

he felt much as you and I
wanting to make the most of every moment

wanting to give his best to every task.

The Lion and the dog, dozing peacefully together on the floor,

must have helped

keep away unwanted visitors

providing much needed solitude,

withdrawal from superficial distractions.

The room is flooded with sunlight

through the leaded casement window arch

it splashes against the walls across his wooden desk—

Illumination

prayed for.

There is a sense

of well-considered priorities

classically arranged.

St. Jerome perhaps is thinking:

Please Lord,

help me

that this stuff of prayerful dreaming

which now becomes solid and real

help me

be as mindful

as I need be to walk within this dream.

Shadows

So here am I

poetrywalking my eyes

feeling words like

thistledown or

wisps

of ink-smoke

and the mirrors blanch as

all the while

my attentive mind quivers and

my body responds

with pain or with

delight when

the mystery of wordworlds

let the ink seep.

Come ahead, come walk with me

try not to fall

scrape a knee break

a knotted bone

no cause for fear

they are merely mist-strewn

thoughtwords

and yet

something inexplicable has uneased me as

mindshadows

appear

and ghost their wordy way

across the white space

A Face in the Oak

I think I know where he lives by day
gathering strength
for his nightly visitations. I have seen him
in a certain tree each morning right here—
right here among us, you and I.
A wizard encased in the skin of trees,
his umber-shadowed arms reach
through the air and sunlight as if to
softly touch the hyperborean sky.
And from his great height he looks down
with such kindness
upon us and he whispers
“Stay awhile
here among the trees,
watch and listen and breathe”

Daughter Beloved

She was still asleep
when I went upstairs to ask if she wanted breakfast,
her breathing peaceful, rhythmic, her face
alight with dreams. She lies amidst
items of the marketplace all her own—sheets and pillows crafted
from fabrics of intricate, luxurious design—the image of her sleeping
like a painting in some far away museum. Her hair is
strewn across the pillows like leaves, her body small and slender beneath
the covers on her bed. Some dark cruel madman recently broke her heart.
How I wish that I could take away her pain! Show her
how valuable she is—oh that I could commission an artist to translate
the vision of her beauty to a canvass six feet by four—huge
against the wall and entitled:
Amy, my beloved, most beautiful daughter.

Blessing the House

I tell myself, “This is the first house you have ever owned.

You should be grateful, every day.”

I am too—it is a lovely house:

cedar-sided cape cod on a hill

half an acre for gardens—

why I could put down roots here, plant

so many daffodils or even

tomatoes—

white tree wisteria, tree peonies, roses,

lavenders and wild herbs.

But that is speaking to the garden not

the house. I don’t feel this house is mine.

The rooms are reminiscent of a house I once knew well,

the house we grew up in, my brother and sisters and I.

I am quite sure, for instance, that

the ground floor master bedroom was originally

two separate rooms; someone must have knocked down a wall.

The living room, once confused,

has now grown calm and centered healed by fortress walls

of books, the light of crystals, and the songs of birds.

In the kitchen it is easy to imagine our mother preparing dinner

at my newly purchased stove. She is cooking and listening

while I, thirteen again, practice the piano

positioned in my house now just as that piano was back then.

Our father, grandparents, all the aunts and uncles,

remembered and beloved every one,

are here too, smiling at me over my shoulders. They

are praying I accomplish whatever it is that I am supposed to do.

In this house, as in every house, there are so many ghosts.

I sleep downstairs alone. The larger of the two upstairs bedrooms

is by day sunwarmed-full with dancing golden light. I can feel

that some past occupants must have loved here so honestly

the energy of their love remains, palpable, even now.

Head in the Clouds

In the beforetime it had lain in the thick enveloping dark unaware, its tiny nerve endings occasionally flitting, twitching, at other times its mouth gaping wide, and all was darkness, all was emptiness and void; life before life. Now it was awakening, a dim consciousness through the dark mists, a new life dawning unto itself. Hunger was all it knew; and from that dark and humid warmth and sleep an overweening hunger pulsed its small body, coursed through its every cell, while its brain cried out, its voice demanding of the Larger Others that came and went as merely shadows in the gloom:

Feed me. I live. Feed me. Feed me. Feed me;

and then the warm and partially digested food entering its bobbing head to swallow, its gullet warmed yet thin:

More. Feed me more, more, and more.

Now a drowsiness and warmth and sleep, hiccupping as the food digested, sleep, and sleep. And in sleep hearing the softly uttered sounds of the Larger Others, close by, warm, alive, protective, sharing their bodies' warmth, keeping the chill of death at bay. At length the hunger came again:

O feed me

and this time through small slits came light unto its brain; colors startling and shocking a new awareness, greens and browns and vivid reds and golden light, and the Larger

Others, those two singular voices, now become recognizable, each voice individual and distinct, come with food, filling it again, warm; but the light, oh the light, pain, yet not pain, only light and hunger,

Oh I live feed me.

And it saw the deep and varied greens, shading into yellows glinting, and many shades of blue, turquoise, cobalt, colors within colors reflected in the out coverings of its kind; and the blackness of the Others' eyes, their lighter iris amber in the sunlight. And the Larger Others it now knew as female and male, and both bring food, warm and thin, and nourishing; it knew its own movement, bumping and pushing the Smaller Other, competing for the food

Mine! Mine! I live!

And finding its own voice, knowing its own voice from all the others, whether Large or Small, its own voice calling, reaching out, communicating. And it knew, it learned, there was Call and Response here among the warmth, the food, the one bright beam of light, and the voices all in the dark and humid softness of the world, this world of Here and Now.

It knew not the passing of time, marking the hours, the days, only by its hunger, its need for life-sustaining food. Yet still time passed and with time's passing change came to the world it knew and to itself. Legs strengthened so it could chase the Larger Others begging food, always begging, using its voice now grown strong and loud, demanding, feeling new strength in its body, as the outer coverings bloomed, eyes now

fully opened, a deeper still awareness formed; an inborn recognition of itself and of its place, its condition even in this Safe World but especially in the Wider World the Larger Others visited; it knew itself and its kind as prey. It felt the twitch of muscle fibers lining pectorals, heard the quick swish of its appendages as they flicked when sudden movements started and it knew fear. Somehow it knew that more than just a cry was needed now that it was grown larger; although it felt the passion to protect self and other, the willingness to fight, to tear, to claw, yet its instincts understood that ultimately its best defense was flight.

And now it was aware of something beyond fear and flight and hunger; some new sensation, some new knowledge as it recognized the Larger Others upon their return. It knew them as its family. It was grateful to them and it loved them. It needed to be amongst them safe and secure among their numbers, soothing to feel the Larger Others groom it tenderly, sweetly. It knew too the companionship of the Smaller Other, the warmth of their huddling together in the safety of the dark. It felt comforted by and in their presence; it knew the contentment of belonging.

Yet the one thin beam of light that pierced the darkness beckoned, taunted, and drew it and the Smaller Other to the place by which the Larger others entered and left the safe dark world. Somehow the dark warm world it knew, the only world it had ever known, was now grown small and crowded, dirty and uncomfortable. Its muscles trembled and twitched with some independent memory of their own, and some inner urging drew it forth into the blinding, beaming light of the larger world. Poised there at the brink, it knew only that it felt a need as strong as hunger, a new hunger, a hunger for

the freedom of the light and for the vaulted and canopied skies. It stood high on its newly muscled legs and with deliberation let its appendages beat rapidly in the air, strengthening them, their wild beating filling the Safe world with sound as though it were home to a swarm of bees. Sometimes it used its toes and feet to grasp bits of grasses and fine thin branches in its refuge. It clasped them tightly; perching there in the shadowed dark gazing at the light and felt its appendages beat the air, strengthening those muscles for what was yet to come.

Something inexplicable occurred and it found itself suddenly aloft and soaring, the air buoying its hollow bones, its body sailing as a tiny ship through the sunlit air. Exhilarated, it called back to the Smaller Other perched at the dark entrance to the Safe World,

Follow! Come and see! Follow!

Upward it sailed through soft and leafy branches, the tops of dense forest canopy below, the bright glorious rush of light and air and it knew freedom. Then, a familiar cry, the male and female Larger Others, and feeling both a crushing longing for their presence and the need of finding food, it turned and made its way back to their sound. They there amid the forest trees, one perched upright on a branch, the other hanging like a leaf, upside down, their greenness blending with the surrounding foliage, making them nearly invisible. But it saw, it knew them, and it felt its toes grasp a thin branch nearby as its body folded in upon itself and motion ceased. It scuttled quickly across the branches and entangling vines on deft legs running nearer to them; behind it the leaves and branches

shivered as the Smaller Other landed there. Together they ran to the Larger Others, their voices a chorus as they cried and fluttered begging to be fed.

Hwæt!

A cacophony of screeches, yowls, and yawps caused them all to freeze into motionless position, some perched low on branches whilst others hung suspended from leafy boughs. Some new Creature had come into the forest, and it was hunting. Taking to the skies they flew, leaving death and danger far below, and they were safe for awhile, there in the highest canopy of trees.

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